From Vicarious Trauma to Vicarious Resilience: Rethinking Stress in the Workplace

Ryan Breen LCPC, CADC
The effects of stress are negative and should be avoided.

0 – Strongly Disagree
1 – Disagree
2 – Neither Agree or Disagree
3 – Agree
4 – Strongly Agree
Experiencing stress facilitates my learning and growth.

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Experiencing stress depletes my health and vitality.

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Experiencing stress enhances my Performance and productivity.

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Experiencing stress inhibits my learning and growth.

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Experiencing stress improves my health and vitality.

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Experiencing Stress debilitates my performance and productivity.

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The effects of stress are positive and should be utilized.

0 – Strongly Disagree
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3 – Agree
4 – Strongly Agree
Stress Mindset Measure (SMM)

- Validated Instrument
  - Stress Mindset is a distinct Variable.
  - Stress Mindset is a significant predictor of health and life satisfaction.
    - More so than:
      - Amount of Stress
      - Social Coping
      - Adaptive Internal Coping
      - Aversive Internal Coping

(Crum et al. 2013)
Stress “The Epidemic”

• Six Leading Causes of Death
  ▫ Heart Disease
  ▫ Accidents
  ▫ Cancer
  ▫ Liver Disease
  ▫ Lung Ailments
  ▫ Suicide

• At Work
  ▫ Absenteeism from Work
  ▫ Increased Medical Expenses
  ▫ Loss of Productivity

• Mental Health
  ▫ Cognitive Impairment
  ▫ Depression
  ▫ Aggression
  ▫ Relational Conflict
  ▫ Other Mental Illness
Stress and The Legacy of Hans Selye

• 1936 – Hungarian Endocrinologist

• “Stress was the response of the body to any demand made on it.”

• Broadly Defined to encompass, “Just about everything that happens to you.”

• Eustress vs. Distress
The Stress Response

- “Mismatch Theory” – “Fight” or “Flight” and “Evolutionary Baggage”
- Sympathetic Activation & Parasympathetic Withdrawal.
- Increased activity of the HPA Axis to meet the demands – Cortisol, Adrenaline, Restriction of Blood Vessels.
- Adversity
  - Physiological Arousal
  - Narrowed Attention
  - Focused Resources
Traditional View on Stress: Preventing my cup from overflowing!

• Its all about *Frequency, Intensity, and Duration* of the external stressor.
• Stress Could be beneficial to the point of allostatic load at which point it becomes debilitating.
• Objective level of stress are offset by how well a person can “Cope” and “Self-Care.”
  ▫ Relaxation techniques to change biological response.
  ▫ Cognitive Restructuring to change one’s emotional or cognitive response.
  ▫ Social skills to increase likelihood of social support during times of stress.
Problems With Traditional View

• Coping research has provided little help.
  ▫ **Avoiding or Reducing** is difficult and can be counterindicated.
    • Can’t avoid all stress. i.e. bills, family, deadlines.
  ▫ Coping processes are variable, complicated, and can induce more stress.
    • Requires time to learn skills, life style changes, diet, exercise, etc... Can add strain to the situation.
  ▫ Avoiding and Coping Strategies perpetuate the “Stress is Debilitating” mindset.
Mindset

“A mental frame or lens that selectively organizes and encodes information, thereby orienting an individual toward a unique way of understanding an experience and guiding one towards corresponding actions and responses.”
(Adapted from Dweck, 2008)

Stress Mindset: A Distinct Variable

- Can be changed through exposure to selective information.
- Mindset is a distinct variable that influences the stress response and is different from:
  - Severity of Stressor being experienced.
  - Manner in which one copes.
- “Stress is Debilitating” 
  Vs.
- “Stress is Enhancing”
  - Enhancing Consequences
  - Performance and Productivity
  - Health and Well Being
  - Learning and Growth
  - Work Performance

Stress Mindset: A Distinct Variable

- Evaluation of the nature of stress itself
- Not a “Coping Strategy” but can inform strategies that are used.
- **Stress Mindset**: The attributes and expectations ascribed to stress whether one is stressed or not.
- Not referring to Appraisal of the stressor.
  - Example: Situation can be seen as highly stressful but can be viewed as enhancing or debilitating.
Beliefs About Stress

- (N=97 Male and Females)
- Negotiating Test
- We already know that short term increases in cortisol correlates with:
  - Improved Learning
  - Increased Attention
  - Boost Memory
  - Performance on Cognitive Tasks.
- Appraising anxiety as helpful during stressful negotiations can offset the negative effects of cortisol.
- Stress is Enhancing coupled with High Cortisol Produces Positive Adaptations
- When told to view their anxiety as helpful:
  - Cortisol Stayed High in Both Groups.
  - Reappraisal Manipulation Produced Better Performance than Non-Manipulated Group.

(Akinola et all 2016)
Beliefs About Stress

- (N=1,343 Adolescents)

- As adverse experiences go up so does perceived distress.

- Perceived Distress predicts Self-Control.

- Beliefs about stress offset this effect.
  - No relation between types of life events and perceived distress.
  - Stress in Enhancing = Low levels of perceived distress.
  - Mindset may influence emotional reactivity to objective stressors.
  - Decrease Impulsivity
  - Increase Self-Regulation

Increasing stress over time equals decrease in self-control – Not in the stress is enhancing group (Park et al. 2017).
Beliefs About Stress

• (N=113) Trier Social Stress Task
• Mindset Moderates the Response: Challenge v. Threat
  ▫ (Demand/Resources Ratio above 1=Threat Below 1 = Challenge)
• Stress is Debilitating
  ▫ Less Cognitive Flexibility
  ▫ Less Bias to happy faces (Less able to see happy faces. Stress clouds the ability to receive feedback even when given positively and under manageable stress.
• Stress is Enhancing + Challenge (Demand/Resources Ratio above 1)
  ▫ Positive Mood and Emotional Expression Under Stress
    • Contribute to not feeling overwhelmed
  ▫ Cognitive Flexibility, Creativity, Novel Thinking
  ▫ Increase DHEAS = Stress Growth Factor (Cortisol is Still High)
    • Promotes physiological thriving
  ▫ Attention to Happy Faces
  ▫ Emotional Feeling of Stress Remains
• Stress is Enhancing + Threat

(Crum et all. 2017)
Beyond “Fight or Flight”: The 3 Stress Responses

• **Fight or Flight** – Very useless unless under direct physical threat.
  ▫ **Blunted Cortisol**
    • Down regulation of the immune system and development of autoimmune disorders.
  ▫ **Excessive Cortisol**
    • Calorie dense food cravings
    • Store Fat
    • Decreased energy
    • Compromised immune system.

• **Challenge Response** – Produces optimal physiological response.

• **Tend and Befriend**
The Challenge Response

• Stress can point us to “Meaning & Purpose”
• Mindset Effects:
  ▫ Effects on Short Term Physiology of the Stress Response.
    • Moderates Cortisol Reactivity (DHEA)
    • Long term health benefits
    • Performance
    • Learning
    • Well-Being
  ▫ More likely to engage in actions(behavior) that meet demand, goal, or underlying value.
    • Appropriate level. Neither avoidance or overreaction.
The Challenge Response

- Not about Optimism.
- Less Depression and Anxiety
- Higher levels of Energy (Motivation)
- Life Satisfaction
- Lower Perceived Stress.
The Tend and Befriend Response

• The Workplace Responsibility
• The Supervisor
• Co-Workers
• Work BFF
• Team Building and Collaboration
Stress At Work

• Motivates proactive problem solving.
  ▫ Anticipation and planning for all possible outcomes.
  ▫ Increases memory and performance on cognitive tasks.

• Narrowing of Perspective
  ▫ Good or Bad
  ▫ Depends on properly channeling.
    • Challenge Response increase problems solving and learning.
    • Threat Response limits ability to adapt and think outside the box.
“Stress Related Growth”

- Stressful experiences fundamentally change individuals for the better.
  - Enhance Mental Toughness
  - Heightened Awareness
  - New Perspective
  - Sense of Mastery
  - Strengthened Priorities
  - Deeper Relationships
  - Greater Appreciation for Life
  - Greater Sense of Meaning

Take Aways

- **How you talk about stress (work) matters.**
  - Providing a challenge tied to a person’s professional/personal development need.
  - Frame the experience of work in terms of growth.
  - Identifying and encouraging personal responsibility for our emotional response to the stressor. (i.e. Don’t blame the stressor.)
  - Ask What is my response to the stressor saying about my need to grow? How am I a being challenged to learn?

- **Providing the right interpersonal support**
  - **Rapport** is key in working with clients and is the same for working with supervisees.
Take Aways Cont’d

• Providing Feedback
  ▫ Negative Feedback can be seen as threatening:
    • Self-Esteem
    • Increased Anxiety & Stress
  ▫ “Stress is Enhancing” Mindset
    • Encourages reception of feedback and critique. (Part of the learning process)
    • Encourages the seeking of feedback.
    • Challenge Response makes feedback more inviting because it is tied to my “growth” “purpose” “meaning”
Let’s see what you think now...

Changing Our Stress Mindset

1) Learning a new point of view.
   ▫ How can I/You look at the situation different? Reframe?

2) Doing an exercise that encourages one to adopt and apply the new mindset.
   ▫ What actions steps are called for in light of this new perspective?

3) Providing an opportunity to share the idea with others.
   ▫ Talk about the new idea and philosophy with others.